The Cupola Tavern, Briton Ferry

In 1851, what is now Church Street in Briton Ferry was just a lane from the village to the church, with a few houses and no taverns or beerhouses. But the Briton Ferry Iron works had opened in 1847 and the Great Western Railway in 1850, and massive changes were soon to be seen. Parliament passed the Briton Ferry Dock and Railway Act in 1851, and construction of the dock, designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel, began in 1853. The first of many blast furnaces at the works came into service in 1854, and the number of men employed grew substantially. In 1858, Slater's Directory commented "The Briton Ferry iron works are of great magnitude, and afford employment to a vast number of hands. The village begins to assume the appearance of a busy place. Houses are being erected with astonishing rapidity, and the population is rapidly increasing. "

Church Street, by then called Ferry Road, was on the route to and from the iron works and dock construction site, and there was a growing demand for taverns and beerhouses. By 1861 there were 5 drinking establishments in the street. One of these was the Cupola Tavern, established in 1855 by Leyshon Thomas, an iron moulder at the Briton Ferry Works. The inn was named after the cupola furnaces used at the works in the smelting of iron.

Finding a route for the new railway to the docks was made difficult by the density of housing, and the line passed very close to the Cupola before crossing the road at a gated crossing.

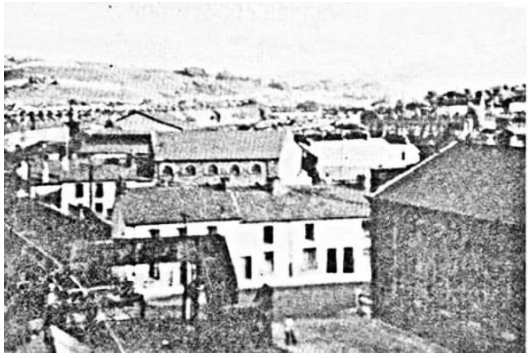
In 1856 a massive brawl broke out at the tavern, and many windows were broken. Several men were convicted and jailed for non-payment of the resulting fines. In 1860 a newspaper reported that Leyshon had been refused the renewal of his licence to sell beer, but he appears to have overcome the difficult, and was selling beer again in 1861.

In July of 1862 he was imprisoned for bankruptcy. He was treasurer of the local branch of the society of Foresters, and at his second bankruptcy hearing six weeks later it was alleged that he owed the society £18 and had absconded with their funds, intent on going to New Zealand. He was arrested in Portsmouth, having travelled there via London, with just 9 old pence in his pocket, and brought back to court, but no witnesses appeared to verify this or to evidence the debt, and he was released from prison.

Leyshon Thomas emigrated to the USA in 1867, and by 1871 the Cupola had been renamed the Port Wallaroo Inn. Wallaroo is a port town in a part of South Australia known as Little Cornwall because of its copper mining industry. The connection with an inn in Briton Ferry is unclear, but the name may have been proposed by a returning emigrant. The adjacent level crossing was also known as the Port Wallaroo crossing.

The Port Wallaroo was run by a succession of landlords until it became a private dwelling, number 28 Church Street, very early in the 20th century. It remained so until it fell empty in about 1965, and was demolished along with other houses in

the terrace in around 1970 to make way for what is now Villiers Court. The remains of the railway line and crossing gates can still be seen.



The Cupola Tavern comprises the three windows on the right hand end of the terrace partly obscured by the railway bridge, and the site as it is today

The Briton Ferry iron works and docks